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review



Penny for your thoughts

How festivals of ideas became big business



Janne Ryan, executive producer for TEDx Sydney, wants the organisation to lead the zeitgeist

Everybody's talking

GREG Mackie may not have shown it, but he was petrified. It was midwinter 1999 and, with just hours to go before the key event of Adelaide's first Festival of Ideas, ticket sales were lousy, if not disastrous.

The festival — an ideas forum straddling geopolitics, science and the arts — was Mackie's creation and the first event of its type held in Australia. The well-connected former bookseller and adviser to Adelaide Writers Week had secured funding for his "bazaar of ideas" from state and local governments and corporate sponsors.

The city's 2000-seat Festival Theatre had been booked for an evening talk by renowned Palestinian politician and feminist Hanan Ashrawi. But by 10 that morning, only 300 tickets to the event had been sold. As the clock ticked down, an increasingly agitated Mackie was faced with the embarrassing prospect of 1700 empty seats. "It was terrifying... we didn't know whether we'd have an audience," he says.

Suddenly, things changed. Adelaide ticket buyers who had tortured Mackie with their apparent indifference started to respond. By 4pm, 1000 tickets had been sold to the Ashrawi lecture; by early evening, ticket buyers were lined up around the block. Mackie, who now works for South Australia's Department of Premier and Cabinet, recalls: "By 7.30pm, when it was supposed to kick off, people were still queueing down the road... From that point on, every venue was full, and the atmosphere was quite electric." After a knuckle-whitening start, that festival of ideas went on to attract 20,000 ticket buyers.

Today the festival is a biennial fixture on Adelaide's cultural calendar: the previous event, in 2009, attracted more than 30,000 people. This year's festival opens on Friday and organisers anticipate their expanded program will further boost attendances. The line-up is nothing if not eclectic: speakers

In a world apparently dumbing down, ideas festivals are the new rock 'n' roll, writes **Rosemary Neill**

range from leading scientists Peter Doherty and Penny Sackett to an ethical hacker, a Nabokov specialist and sexuality expert Christopher Ryan, who has argued that "demanding long-term sexual monogamy of human beings is akin to demanding strict vegetarianism of an omnivore".

Since that tense debut in Adelaide 12 years ago, festivals of ideas have effloresced across the country, often attracting thousands of paying customers to hear experts expound on concepts so newly minted, they may not have been presented at any campus, conference or internet forum.

Sydney's third Festival of Dangerous Ideas, an annual event with a contrarian vibe, is on this weekend. Its star speakers — writer and animal rights campaigner Jonathan Safran Foer, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and Marc Thiessen, former speech writer for George Bush — may be poles apart ideologically, but they are all likely to unsettle their listeners.

Assange, the world's most notorious hacker, was due to address the festival last night. The agent provocateur was to speak by video link, as he is under house arrest in London. (He has appealed his extradition to Sweden, where he is facing sexual assault charges, which he denies.) His festival topic: Why WikiLeaks hasn't gone far enough.

Thiessen will address an equally combustible question — is torture necessary? — while Safran Foer will discuss how Westerners' insatiable demand for cheap meat makes mistreatment of animals inevitable.

Other subjects designed to disrupt comfort zones include: environmentalists should give up on sustainability; Australia is a third-rate country; the media has no morals; and the old chestnuts, all women are sluts and footballers are barbarians.

Brisbane and Melbourne hosted ideas festivals earlier this year. At Vivid Sydney, a "festival of light, music and ideas" that attracts thousands to the harbour in winter, ideas sessions are programmed alongside gigs by the likes of the Cure and Ricki Lee Jones. Then, of course, there is the global ideas movement, TED. With its evangelical catchphrase "ideas worth spreading", it has spawned satellite conferences in Brisbane, Adelaide, Canberra and Sydney — the Queensland and South Australian capitals are about to host their own mini-TED events, known as TEDx.

TEDx Brisbane is being held on October 15, and among its guests will be Stephen Little, an autistic British-Caribbean artist. Throughout his childhood Little was mute, locked in his own world. He has since become famous for his astonishingly detailed cityscapes, often drawn from memory. During his visit to Brisbane he is to create a portrait of the city and its snaking river.

Founded in 1984, as its name suggests, TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) was originally an American conference focused on technology, design and Silicon Valleyish, blue-sky thinking. Since then it has evolved from a kind of Nerdstock to a hot-ticket item money can't necessarily buy: audiences must apply in writing and are hand-picked by the organisers. Those chosen to attend TED's California or Edinburgh conferences are then slugged \$US6000. (TEDx conferences in Australia are free but local audiences, like their overseas counterparts, are hand-selected.)

Despite or perhaps because of its aura of elitism, this non-profit "clearinghouse for ideas" has almost peerless pulling power. Its US conference sells out a year in advance and

has attracted powerbrokers such as former US president Bill Clinton, former US vice-president Al Gore, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates and Google co-founder Sergey Brin, as well as a large coterie of Nobel prizewinners and the odd Hollywood celebrity.

An 18-minute time limit is imposed on speakers, who are expected to attack their arguments with the energy and verve befitting old theatre hands. "We try to make our speakers look like rock stars," June Cohen, the head of TED Talks, said recently.

AT a time when it's widely assumed that we're dumbing down — reading less, watching more reality television or spending too much time on Facebook — what underlies this intense interest in live exchanges of ideas? Ideas are emerging as a kind of performance art; a salon for the masses, a form of entertainment at once new and old. On the one hand, ideas festivals recall the days of town hall meetings or speaking tours by authors such as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. On the other, they are plugged into social media networks and the imperative to be entertaining or provocative: lecture hall erudition meets theatre-sports.

At TED's sellout California conferences, moments of high drama have included Gates talking about malaria and releasing mosquitoes into an auditorium, and a scientist holding a human brain in her hands, its still-attached spinal cord dangling like a tail. At this year's conference, a woman confined to a wheelchair for 19 years stunned the audience by demonstrating the hi-tech "exo-skeleton" that allowed her to walk.

In an era when the average householder has access to almost limitless information through the mass media and new media, the heightened interest in ideas forums seems counter-intuitive. How to explain it? Is it a reaction to public debates in which politicians are perceived to be talking without saying anything? A response to a media bloated with partisan commentary, or of commentators taking numbingly predictable positions? An antidote to a news cycle and tweetsphere in which complex issues are reduced to soundbites or statements of 140 characters or less?

Simon Longstaff, co-curator of Sydney's Festival of Dangerous Ideas, believes the popularity of ideas festivals is a reflection of how polarised public debate has become. "There was a period," he says, "in which matters of public concern were often presented to the community in a take-it-or-leave-it manner which, if you were a member of the public, there was a rush to judgment: you were either for this or against this... What these festivals and debates do is to provide a fresh opportunity to go back and look at the arguments."

Mackie says of the growing phenomenon: "There has never been so much access to so much discourse through electronic media than today and yet at the same time there's an audience, appetite and market for the notion of people coming together in real space and real time to listen and to think together. It's a bit of a hearkening back to the days of the old town hall meetings. It's drawn from the notion that culture isn't something that one consumes solely in the privacy of one's home; that there is something magical about the live experience."

Mackie also believes the success of ideas forums demonstrates how "we have a

capacity for greater depth and greater meaning than the 24-hour sound grab cycle delivers”.

Sandy Verschoor, executive producer of Adelaide's Festival of Ideas, connects the flowering of such festivals with the sweeping change and uncertainty confronting our society. “We are sort of at this really interesting point in time,” she says. “We have a lot of areas where we are at a tipping point — climate change, human rights, social interaction and social media — so people want a picture of what the future might be.” Reflecting this, her festival's theme this year is “planning for uncertainty” in the fields of science, politics, religion and the media.

HONOUR killings. Ethicist Longstaff is scouting around for a speaker who is not only aware of this vile practice but supports it. He would like to engage such a speaker for next year's Festival of Dangerous Ideas.

He explains with a nonchalance that is disconcerting: “It strikes most Australians as being a terribly dangerous idea that anyone would kill their own child for a matter of family honour, and yet I can imagine that there are people in our society now who might think that national honour or other beliefs might give rise to justification for killing. How do we make sense of that? Its very plausibility is what makes it a dangerous idea. If it was impossible or ridiculous, then it wouldn't be dangerous, it would just be a festival of fanciful ideas.”

Longstaff agrees the festival he co-curates “pushes the envelope”. From the start, he says, “we wanted to find those ideas that were dangerous, not because they were utopian and out of this world but precisely because they were the sorts of things that might generate a visceral response”.

In the past, this festival has heard from Muslim spokesman Keysar Trad on why polygamy is desirable, and from conservative thinker Daniel Pipes who argues that Islam is incompatible with democracy. Longstaff recalls that Pipes “was so concerned about his safety, we had to have special security provided for him. As it turned out it was a heated but respectful exchange of views.”

Longstaff compares these spoken performances to the cathartic role drama played in ancient Greece, when communities used

theatre to work through the real issues they confronted. Ideas festivals, he says, “are speaking to an audience and engaging with them at a deeper level. To that extent, I think these festivals might be performing a wider role than the word ‘entertainment’ might encompass.”

When distinguished child psychiatrist Jon Jureidini spoke at TEDx Sydney last year, he certainly felt pressure to be entertaining. He says of the experience: “Speaking at TEDx was the most anxiety-provoking public speaking engagement I can remember.”

Jureidini is accustomed to speaking at academic or medical conferences where “you will be reasonably confident that people will share the same set of assumptions. It kind of allows you to be a bit lazy in the way that you present your ideas, whereas



Simon Longstaff

at one of these ideas festivals you've got very smart people in the audience who are coming at things from a different perspective. I think it's a more exacting task.”

Despite his performance anxiety he enjoyed the “amazing opportunity to have exposure to people who normally wouldn't listen to you”. After he spoke at TEDx a Treasury official asked him to address that department's policy wonks.

The psychiatrist will be one of 80 speakers appearing at this year's Adelaide Ideas Festival and he will tackle several contentious topics including the differences — or

lack of them — between legal and illegal drugs, and the psychiatric problems faced by asylum-seekers marooned in detention centres. Echoing Longstaff, he feels the public is attracted to ideas forums' non-partisan politics: “I think that TED, in particular, demonstrates the fact there is the possibility of talking seriously about things without it being spayed.” He says you can take part in these events “at the level of arousal that you might normally associate with entertainment rather than scientific debate”.

Jureidini was recruited for TEDx Sydney by Janne Ryan, the event's executive producer. Ryan, who helped establish Phillip Adams's long-running *Late Night Live* show on Radio National, describes herself as an “ideas producer”. Sydney has hosted two one-day TEDx events — the third will be held next May — and Ryan talks about them with the conviction of a true believer. She describes these strictly licensed events as “enormously enriching and an enormous insight into the world of ideas”.

Audiences for TEDx Sydney are limited to 800 people and many more apply than are accepted. Isn't this emphasis on exclusivity contrary to the movement's aim of democratising knowledge? Ryan responds: “We try to make an audience that is fresh and has a range of interests . . . It's not about inviting powerbrokers.”

Most of the Sydney audience members are aged under 50 and working in newer areas of academe, design and technology. She notes “they should be listening to Radio National but they're not”, feeling that the conventional media has perhaps “got a bit stuffy”. At TEDx, speakers are trained to clarify and soup up their message. Says Ryan: “TED is a performed text; a performance. You've got to be really good on the stage. It is learning to get up and sell your idea convincingly from the core of your heart. We aim to entertain people at the high end of ideas.”

TEDx Sydney speakers have addressed themes from climate change to the end of government. The aim, says Ryan, is to “lead the zeitgeist” and bring an “energy for change”. She says the TED movement is big on rigour. “It's not just a Pollyanna sort of thing,” she insists.

While its rhetoric about changing the world by talking about it can sound over-

blown, TED's digital and global expansion shows little sign of slowing. Since 2006 the non-profit organisation has produced free web videos of its live talks. To date, these videos have notched up 500 million views for topics ranging from algorithms to women's rights in Yemen.

TED boss Chris Anderson believes web videos are a form of “crowd-accelerated learning” and have revolutionary educative potential. Earlier this year, in an interview with US broadcaster Charlie Rose, Anderson pointed out that while people feared the world was dumbing down, there was also “this other story of thousands and thousands of people around the world willing to go to huge lengths to meet with each other, to think . . . I find that really exciting.”

Ryan attributes the mass interest in often-obscure subjects to the fact there is a bigger pool of well-educated people than there was 50 or 100 years ago. “There are a lot of highly educated, literate people now and they live in places like Australia . . . people are hungry for content and knowledge.”

But not everyone is in thrall to TED. Some accuse it of elitism, pointing to the hand-picking of audiences and the \$US6000 entry fee for the US and British conferences. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of *Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, who spoke at a 2008 TED event, has called its conferences a “monstrosity that turns scientists and thinkers into low-level entertainers, like circus performers”.

Mackie, however, welcomes the growth of TEDx in Australia, even though these events compete indirectly with Adelaide's Festival of Ideas. “It's a really good thing,” he says. “The more of this stuff that happens, the better for society. They all [ideas forums] grow the objective of a better informed community.”

He also reckons there is enough demand for his city's biennial event to go annual. This, indeed, is a far cry from that anxiety-ridden day 12 years ago when it looked as if Mackie's pioneering forum had everything it needed — except an audience.

Festival of Dangerous Ideas, Sydney, this weekend.

Adelaide Festival of Ideas, October 7-9.

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